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It's Hard Work Learning Soft Skills: Can Client Based Projects Teach the Soft Skills Students Need and Employers Want?

Christina McCale[1]
Regis University, Denver, Colorado, 80221

Abstract

The importance of business relevance in academia coupled with an increasingly challenging job market magnifies the importance for students to be better prepared for the marketplace. Client-based projects have been lauded for helping students gain the soft skills employers look for in entry-level employees, but little research supports this premise. This study discusses how students improved their soft skill sets, ultimately preparing them for career entry by working with business clients. This study demonstrates students benefit by not only applying the theories of marketing to a practical activity, but also by providing an opportunity to develop the skill sets needed to transition their careers.

Keywords: Client based projects, business education, assessment of learning, soft skills, career preparation, marketing education.

Employers have often stated that graduating marketing majors do not have the requisite skills to be successful, entry-level professionals. This is not a new complaint. In the mid-70s, Mintzberg (1976) described how education had to change to meet the needs of business more effectively. "Greater use should be made of the powerful new skill-development techniques which are experiential and creative in nature … Educators need to put students into situations… where they can practice managerial skills, not only interpersonal but also informational and decisional." (p. 53) The importance of business relevance in academia (Porter & McKibbon, 1988), coupled with an increasingly challenging job market (McCorkle, Alexander, Reardon, & Kling, 2003) magnifies the importance for students of all majors – business students, liberal arts majors, etc. – to be better prepared for the marketplace. Today, college graduates, regardless of their major, must not only possess the requisite marketing-related skills but also certain supporting skills such as communications abilities and problem-solving aptitude in order to be successful as an entry-level employee (McCorkle, Alexander, Reardon, & Kling, 2003).

The competitive job market complicates this matter. In recent years, fewer companies have been visiting college campuses than in previous years (Capell, 2002). Perhaps the biggest shock for many marketing undergraduates is that "a marketing degree is not re-

[1] Corresponding author's email: cmccale@regis.edu

quired for many entry-level [marketing] jobs, meaning that marketing majors must compete for them against college graduates from other fields" (Taylor, 2003, p. 97).

Researchers have focused on a few, key, supporting skills today's business managers continually state are the most important to an entry-level employee's career success which are, according to employers, missing from the educational landscape. The abilities most commonly valued among employers include: communication and interpersonal skills (Scott & Frontczak, 1996; Floyd & Gordon, 1998) and problem-solving skills or critical thinking abilities (Ray & Stallard, 1994; Floyd & Gordon, 1998). Additionally, McCorkle, et al. (1999) included computer/technology skills, presentation skills, leadership skills, job search skills, teamwork skills, multicultural skills, and creative/innovator skills.

These supporting skill sets would not typically be thought of as skills that can be enhanced by students' marketing courses. However the literature shows that students' skills can be enhanced through experiential learning activities, such as the culminating experience found in client-based projects (Bobbitt, Inks, Kemp, & Mayo, 2000).

Indeed the client-based project, or the live case method as some researchers call it, can be quite beneficial. Working with real clients as opposed to case studies helps students learn problem-solving skills as well as how to manage the ambiguity a young professional will inevitably experience when they begin working (Lincoln, 2006). Clients or managers may fail to provide all the information, give conflicting information or provide less direction than an entry-level employee might prefer. Further, students aren't necessarily seeking the presumed, right answer as prescribed by an author in a text book; in a real situation, students are acting on and reacting to information that is being gathered in bits and pieces rather than information that has been neatly and succinctly summarized in a text book (Leclair & Stottinger, 1999). Client-based projects couple the reinforcement of text book knowledge with real-world application: a prescription employers are specifically asking for in today's college graduates.

Education does not have to be an either/or situation. The inclusion of a client-based project in, for example, an upper division marketing class, can meet the needs of several constituencies: first, it can assist faculty in educating students about the core marketing concepts being reviewed in class. Second, the project can help students provide evidence of the specific skill sets that employers/researchers say are critical to employment success. Lastly, employers would ultimately receive better prepared, more street-ready employees for the workforce. Such projects can be included in a variety of courses, liberal arts, sciences or business, to accomplish the improvement of these same skill sets.

This article provides evidence of the benefits a traditional-aged undergraduate marketing student derives from completing a client-based project. Students find benefit and value in completing such a project both in personal satisfaction as well as professional development of the key supporting skills employers indicate are not only needed in today's graduates. Lastly, completing such an experiential activity not only provides practical

experience, but reinforces the key marketing concepts covered in marketing classes, thus aiding in learning.

Literature Review

Client-based learning

One common experiential activity in popular practice today is the client-based project. The literature refers to this project in a number ways: as live cases and consulting projects most often. While a client-based project could in theory be done in almost any marketing course, it's most often seen in upper level courses such as marketing research and marketing management (Maher & Hughner, 2005; Corbin, 2002; Elam & Spotts, 2004).

While there are numerous articles about these types of projects, few go into specific detail about the project: often the articles are written more as a how-to approach with little substantive analysis for what students gain from said projects. The rare exceptions do exist. However, the few studies that do measure elements are typically very limited in scope as to what they do measure. For example: Karnes' research (1993; 2005) provides a rare glimpse of how undergraduate students not only prefer certain experiential learning activities but also how effective they are, based on challenge and connection to the real world. While this is extraordinarily valuable, it does not measure what skills or knowledge students gain. While Maher and Hughner's study (2005) provides an excellent comparison of student preferences between client-based projects and simulations, it measured if the students felt they had learned more – but not ***what*** they learned. Corbin's study (2002), while larger than the others, focuses predominantly on the students' key skills of group management and teaming – certainly critical skills as per employers – but solely limited to this set of skills. Lastly, Elam and Spotts' study (2004) does address soft skills and benefits to the student, but it does not address whether the project reinforced or aided in the understanding of marketing content.

Employers' needs for college graduates to graduate street ready -- that is, prepared to be able to work professionally -- is perhaps the biggest reason to include such projects in coursework. The abilities most commonly valued among employers include: communication skills, interpersonal, and problem-solving skills or critical thinking abilities. These are the key, translatable skills that can be applied in a variety of situations and industries. Thus, it is advisable for faculty members to align their skills and course requirements to teach students these skills in tangible ways (Pritchard, Potter, & Saccucci, 2004).

Student Perceptions/Self-Efficacy

Kolb (1984) states that learning is the process of creating knowledge from experience and is based on six principles:

> Learning is a process, not an outcome; derives from experience; requires an individual to resolve dialectically opposed demands; is holistic and integrative; re-

> quires interplay between a person and environment; and results in knowledge creation (p. 25-38).

Learning, however, rests on a bedrock of core self-concept, or, the perception one has of him/herself. Such perceptions are created by one's experiences and through others' perceptions of the individual. Not surprisingly, self-concept is correlated to achievement (Shavelson & Bolus, 1982).

Related to and part of self-concept are three characteristics:

- ***self-ascribed epistemic authority***, a person's perception of his or her knowledge in a specific topic (Ellis & Kruglanski, 1992);
- ***self-efficacy***, a measure of self-perception, is the belief that one has the ability and/or skills to complete a task (Erikson, 2003), and
- ***outcome expectancy***, that completing a given activity will take a person one step closer to their desired outcome (Stone & Bailey, 2007).

The three are tied in experiential learning theory.

As an example of these tied characteristics, Ellis & Kruglanski (1992) found that a person's self-ascribed epistemic authority influences the success of experiential learning activities. The higher one's self-ascribed authority, the better the subjects responded to the experiential learning activities. One's mastery of certain types of tasks, observing the modeled behavior of other successful individuals (one could make a case that observing unsuccessful individuals and learning from their mistakes could be equally educational) and hearing from others, preferably persons in authority (i.e., the professor or instructor) positive affirmations and coaching all contribute to a person's self-efficacy.

Self-efficacy is heavily influenced and developed through one's personal experience, and is a driver of one's determination to succeed, and colors one's hopes for future results. For example, if a student believes he has the ability to write a marketing plan (self-ascribed authority) and has seen how others write marketing plans and has been told by a trusted professor that he has the talent to be a great marketer (self-efficacy) certainly he will perceive himself as being able to be successful in his final marketing class assignment (outcome expectancy.)

Assessment

Learning, historically, has been synonymous with rote memorization, the lowest level of Bloom's taxonomy of cognitive learning (1956) which moves through a series of levels of learning from recall, to comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis before finally reaching evaluation. The classroom of yesteryear was instructor centered; the instructor passed information on to the students, the sole source of information and primary responsible individual for learning. The modern, more current paradigm proposes that learning be active and student centered. The new model shifts the responsibility for information from being solely the instructor's responsibility to the students as well; learning then

comes from a whole host of sources, one of which is the instructor. (Hernandez, 2002) This migration from passive to active learning environments further supports the move to a more "experientially based" classroom.

The Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) standards, guidelines and recommendations further supports this line of progression through their accreditation requirements encouraging faculty to find new ways of engaging students to be actively involved in their own learning, as opposed to seeing learning that is something that is done "to" them. Further the AACSB (2003, p. 52) states: "Faculty members should find such approaches that are suited to their subject matter and should adopt active learning methodologies."

The movement to outcomes assessment has pressured faculty to measure *if* learning is taking place and *what* learning has been accomplished. Assessment, "defined as any regular and systematic process by which a program faculty designs, implements, and uses valid data gather techniques for determining program effectiveness sand making decisions about program conduct and improvement." (Eastman & Allen, 1999, p. 7) At the micro-level, assessment determines if a student has learned, and to what degree he or she has mastered, specific knowledge and skills. At a mid-level, assessment evaluates the faculty member and the choices he or she has made in designing the course to accomplish course objectives and goals – including their use of experiential learning. At the macro-level, assessment evaluates if a business school or marketing program is meeting the recommendations of such governing bodies as AACSB to not only reinforce program content knowledge but to find ways of actively engaging the student in his or her own learning journey/experience.

While information may be provided, true learning follows the public relations adage, "perception is reality." While a student's interpretation of what they have learned may be quite different from that of the instructor's (Nicholson, Barnett & Dascher, 2005), it is no less, important and can provide insight into the student learning process. A student's perception of not only *what* has been learned, but the relevance, importance and improvement in self-efficacy/outcome expectancy can drastically color his or her interpretation of whether real learning and growth has taken place.

While there are many ways to measure the accomplishment of learning outcomes (Young, Klemz & Murphy, 2003), learning performance, as defined as the "students' self-assessment of their overall knowledge gained, their skills and abilities developed, and the effort they expended in a particular class relative to other classes" (p. 131).

Research Design

This descriptive study portrays the benefits undergraduate marketing students derive from completing experiential learning activities – specifically client-based projects – as described in the literature review. What benefits, skills and knowledge do students gain from completing a client-based marketing project? Can client-based projects prepare students for career entry?

Surveys were made available by a web-based program to 76 traditional undergraduate students of a private college in a Western state who had completed marketing management or marketing research courses which included client-based projects as their final projects. Questions were organized into basic categories: benefits, skills applied/developed, marketing content, and career preparation to gather data to either support or reject the preceding hypotheses. A Likert scale was used with anchors ranging from strongly agree (5) to strongly disagree (1). Demographic data and information regarding the student's amount of work experience (paid, unpaid and classroom projects) were gathered. Four open-ended questions were provided to allow students to elaborate on their experiences. The questions were predominantly identical with the exception of only slightly altering the wording so as to reflect each class name or specific content area.

Classroom Methodology

Students were provided an outline to follow for the client-based projects. Throughout the semester, the instructor drew connections between the marketing text and the students' final project including providing several "work days" in which students brought sectional drafts of their final project to discuss informally with the instructor. Students were required to find their own clients, form their own teams, elect a project manager, and develop their own form of team management, to include conflict resolution.

Results and Discussion

Cronbach's Alpha was used to determine the internal consistency of the survey instrument. The test resulted a .964, thus indicating the survey instrument was reliable.

Demographics

The group was almost evenly split between males (42.7%) and females (43.9%). A little over 6% of the students chose not to answer demographic information. With regards to ethnic diversity, the surveyed group was representative of the school's student body in terms of ethnicity. According to school records 19% of the student body is of an ethnicity other than White/Caucasian. For the study, 1.2% self-identified as African American; 12.2% as Hispanic; and 6% as "Other." Just less than 83% of the students identified themselves as "seniors"; 3.7% as "juniors" and again, 6.1% did not answer the question. Students wrote in their majors – thus allowing for multiple answers. Not surprisingly, the largest representations were: 40% - marketing majors; 12% - communication arts majors; 12% - double majors in marketing and management.

Work experience is high in this group of students.

- 81.6% of students responded they are or have been employed.
    - While the average employment is 29.83 months, more than 27.6% reported a work history of more than 4 years.
    - The range for number of hours worked is astonishing: 5-80 hours weekly; the class average much more in line with expectations (22)
    - 35% of students reported working 30 or more hours weekly.

- 53.7% of replied the have worked in a non-paid situation such as an internship or volunteer experience.
    - The average length of tenure in non-paid employment is significantly shorter, 9.45 months. However, 9.7% of the students report having worked in such positions for more than 24 months – and 6.1% for more than 48 months.
    - The range for number of hours worked is quite wide, 1-40 hours weekly with an average of 9.45, much as one might expect in an internship situation, for instance. However, 11.8% report working more than 20 hours weekly in such unpaid situations.
- 75.6% of students reported they have completed academic projects that have contributed to their skill sets.

Hypothesis 1a stated that there would be differences between how men and women value client-based projects in the area of employer-requested skill set development. At face value, there were strong favorable responses to the project. Ninety-three percent of students stated they perceived the improved the project management skills; 89% stated they improved their critical thinking skills and leadership skills; 88% of the students stated the improved their teamwork skills. However, while females seemed to respond more favorably that they did indeed see improvement in their own skill sets. However, females rated only one skill, project management, significantly differently than the males (95% confidence interval).

A composite score was also calculated for the skills section and t-tested. However, there was no statistical significance between the men's and women's composite scores. Therefore, H1a was partially supported.

Hypothesis 1b stated that there would be a difference between working and non-working students and their perspectives if they improved their soft skills. As a whole, working students responded more favorably that they felt they had improved their skill sets through the client-based project (team work and managing client skills – both at the 90% confidence level). Is it feasible that it is because these students are in the workplace, and therefore have the ability to see what skills are needed and then observe those skills in themselves that they responded so favorably? However, the composite score did not demonstrate significant differences between the employed and non-working student groups. Therefore hypothesis 1b was only partially supported.

Hypothesis 1c stated that there would be a difference between volunteering and non-volunteering students and their perspectives if they improved their soft skills. Students who do not volunteer seemed to respond more strongly that they improved their skill sets – more so than volunteering students. However, none of these findings proved to be statistically significant. Further, a composite score was also created of the skills responses and then t-tested to determine if there was a statistically significant difference between the two groups; there, again, was not. Therefore hypothesis 1c was not supported.

Hypothesis 1d stated that there would be differences between students who have completed academic projects that contribute to their career skill sets, and those who have not, and how they value client-based projects in the area of employer-requested skill set development. T-tests were conducted to determine the differences between these groups. Those students who do not believe they have completed academic activities that improved their skills did seem to acknowledge the client-based projects skill enhancing opportunities more so than those who have completed such academic activities. A composite score was then also created for the skill sets then t-tested to determine if there was a statistically significant difference between the two groups; there, however, was not. However, none of these findings were statistically significant. Therefore hypothesis 1d could not be supported.

Table 1. Skill Set Enhancement.

Skill Sets	Gender	Mean	Employed	Mean	Unpaid Work	Mean	Academic Projects	Mean
Writing skills	Male	3.83	Yes	4.02	Yes	4.00	Yes	3.90
	Female	4.17	No	3.58	No	3.82	No	4.18
Critical thinking skills	Male	4.17	Yes	4.35	Yes	4.25	Yes	4.26
	Female	4.47	No	3.83	No	4.25	No	4.36
Information technology skills	Male	4.06	Yes	4.13	Yes	3.95	Yes	4.00
	Female	4.11	No	3.67	No	4.14	No	4.36
Communications skills	Male	4.06	Yes	4.27	Yes	4.14	Yes	4.23
	Female	4.44	No	4.00	No	4.32	No	4.27
Project Management skills	Male	4.31	Yes	4.58	Yes	4.48	Yes	4.52
	Female	4.72*	No	4.08	No	4.50	No	4.45
Teamwork skills	Male	4.09	Yes	4.39	Yes	4.30	Yes	4.31
	Female	4.58	No	3.92	No	4.29	No	4.36
Leadership skills	Male	4.17	Yes	4.40	Yes	4.32	Yes	4.31
	Female	4.58	No	4.08	No	4.39	No	4.64
Conflict resolution skills	Male	3.89	Yes	4.34	Yes	4.14	Yes	4.26
	Female	4.61	No	3.67	No	4.32	No	4.09
Presentation skills	Male	4.00	Yes	4.26	Yes	4.11	Yes	4.23
	Female	4.44	No	4.08	No	4.36	No	4.27
Managing clients	Male	4.09	Yes	4.47	Yes	4.50	Yes	4.37
	Female	4.67	No	3.92	No	4.18	No	4.45

*95% confidence level

Conclusion/Recommendations

Clearly, no one experiential learning activity can provide benefits to all students, nor is activity appropriate in all situations. This study hoped to uncover what undergraduate marketing students gained from one of the most popularly referenced forms of experien-

tial learning activities found in the marketing literature: the client-based project. While some research had been done about various characteristics of the client-based project, none to date has examined the soft skill development in light of independent variables such as gender, employment, volunteerism and previous academic experiential activities.

Table 2. Hypotheses Results.

Hypothesis	Independent Variable	Results
1a	Gender	Partially Supported
1b	Employment	Partially Supported
1c	Volunteerism	Not Supported
1d	Previous Experiential Learning Activities	Not Supported

The core concepts, that client based projects can teach and reinforce certain skill sets is a cross-disciplinary premise: liberal arts students as well as business students could certainly benefit from the hands on approach a client based project can provide. From the research, it appears that female undergraduate marketing students appear to derive more perceived benefits in the tested areas than do their male counterparts as a whole – particularly in the marketing research course. This is not to say that males can or don't benefit – but certainly one area of study might be to more closely examine male participation in experiential learning to understand more about their perceptions. While there certainly are differences between male and female responses, such as in the skills section, the remaining question is ***why***? Is it because males perceive that they are already entering the courses as seniors with "adequate" skills for the marketplace (thus implying they are blissfully ignorant of employers' perceptions of traditional undergraduates)? Is it due to a self-efficacy difference between males and females? Is it because females are more honest in their responses where as males still find a need to maintain an image of competence –even when anonymity is evident? The existing survey does not address any of these issues, but would certainly be worth considering for future studies.

Further, is this set of experiences with experiential learning unique to marketing classes? What about liberal arts programs? What are the gender differences (if any) when one studies a similar cap-stone, client-based project in a different discipline, such as accounting or management or history? Would there be similar results? Another area of study to consider is to further explore the correlation between work experience, gender and the responses on the survey. Perhaps the males who responded lower than the females have more work experience and already feel they are "prepared?" Lastly, it would be wise to further compare the responses found here in this study to how students react to other forms of experiential learning, such as internships, self-marketing plans, simulations or community based learning.

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